

NEWS RELEASE

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DeNUCCI CALLS FOR IMPROVEMENTS IN SENIOR PHARMACY PROGRAM

State Auditor Joe DeNucci said today that the state's Senior Pharmacy Program, which provides annual prescription drug assistance to eligible senior citizens, has fallen far short of expectations during its first three years of operation.

Although funding for the program has been based on anticipated annual enrollment of 60,000, DeNucci said only 16,500 applications were received during the first year, of which 8,800 were approved. Participation has steadily increased since then, but the most recent enrollment figure of 28,000 as of April, 1999 is still well below the 60,000 target. DeNucci said more improvements are needed at a time when senior citizens are faced with higher prescription drug costs and dwindling insurance coverage.

"So far, the performance of the Senior Pharmacy Program has not lived up to its goals," said DeNucci. "Although the program is starting to reach more people, there's still a long way to go. Even at maximum efficiency, the program, with its eligibility guidelines and \$750 benefit cap, cannot meet the prescription needs of seniors."

DeNucci said this issue is especially critical as a result of the recent decision of Massachusetts HMOs to drop unlimited prescription drug benefits to senior citizens. Noting that the House, Senate and Governor Cellucci all have plans to address the problem, DeNucci said the state must not only avoid the mistakes made during the initial stages of the Senior Pharmacy Program, but also assure a benefit level that realistically meets the pharmacy needs of seniors.

DeNucci said the Senior Pharmacy Program got off to a slow start because the state failed to accurately assess the demand for services and did not provide adequate outreach. Benefits paid out to senior citizens have yet to come close to the \$30 million in available annual funding.

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With participation in the program lagging, the Legislature has made several attempts to encourage enrollment by extending eligibility, entitlements and entry deadlines. However, even these changes have failed to bring enrollment close to the original target of 60,000.

DeNucci's audit also found that many elders were ineligible to participate because of prescription drug coverage they had under other insurance plans. Elder Home Care Services of Worcester, for example, found that 87 percent of the senior citizens it interviewed were precluded from the Senior Pharmacy Program for this reason.

DeNucci recommended that the Executive Office of Elder Affairs and the Division of Medical Assistance conduct a formal determination of needs assessment that can be presented to the Joint Legislative Committee on Health Care to be used to establish appropriate funding and benefit levels. DeNucci also called for a more effective outreach program, and said consideration should be given to expanding the program to include all income-eligible seniors.

"I'm encouraged that the Governor and Legislature are now working to address the problem of high prescription drug costs for senior citizens, and I'm also encouraged that recently the Senior Pharmacy Program is becoming better utilized," concluded DeNucci.